

# *Trans-national Cinema, Creative Labor, and New Directors in Hong Kong*

## トランスナショナルシネマと創作労働 — 香港の新進監督たちにみる知の技法

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### *Abstract:*

*Focusing on Hong Kong's new film directors, this paper explores the latest development of Hong Kong's film scene under the rise of mainland China's cinema and the general milieu of transnational cinema. Unlike the directors of an earlier generation who are often associated with major studios, these new directors, as creative laborer, have to shoulder all risks by themselves, and they are put into a volatile transnational business environment where they are responsible for their continual employability. The new co-production mode of filmmaking might have offered more opportunities for new filmmakers, but such flexibility also deprives them financial and creative stability.*

*Keywords: Transnational cinema, Hong Kong directors, creative labor, new economy*

キーワード：トランスナショナルシネマ、香港映画監督、創造的な労働、新経済

## Introduction

Trans-national co-production is a hot button in today's global film culture, as producers and investors increasingly collaborate internationally to locate and exploit all possible financial and marketing opportunities around the world. Many "post-Fordist" attempts are put together and tested, and academics are following closely to theorize these new happenings. There are currently two models to understand trans-national cinema: a top-down model of corporatist trans-nationalism, as well as a bottom-up adversarial trans-nationalism. According to John Hess and Patricia R. Zimmerman, in the first "commercial" trans-national cinema, collective identities are already dematerialized and depoliticized into new, further segmented markets for capitalist growth, while racial, gender, ethnic, sexual, and national differences of multiple bodies are reasserted and repoliticized the second "independent" trans-national cinema.<sup>\*1</sup> Mette Hjort, in a very different context, also argues for two notions of global cinema, in which *Dogma 95* is considered a kind of "grassroot" globalization that responds to Hollywood's global hegemony.<sup>\*2</sup>

Such dichotomization, valid on its own, tends to dichotomize the practices of global film-making into one of top-down hegemony and one of bottom up congeniality. It also fails to recognize that many key values of their so-called "adversarial trans-nationalism," like flexibility and networking, are themselves values already incorporated by the New Economy, which allows the new phase of Capitalism to be even more evasive and effective. We need to be aware that the two ideologically opposite trans-national cinemas operate on comparable socio-economic conditions. Unlike the time of studio productions when domains of film-making are clearly differentiated, and trained professionals are hired by major companies, currently, both in mainstream and alternative film circles, the notion of job security extinguishes, and one's emotional devotion to film-making is often exploited in the name of creative freedom. For this glamorous dream factory, there is the danger of romanticizing the exercising of creativity as liberation, which runs the risks of idealizing its working environment and effacing workers' need for career protection. Privileging the freedom associated with trans-national activities, the actual working conditions of the workers, which are locally embedded, are often ignored or even effaced.

Here in this paper I focus on, firstly, the recent "trans-nationalization" of Hong Kong cinema and, secondly, the arisen career conditions of new film directors in this industry. I want to explore how their demoralizing and insecure working environment is both culturally and historically unique and universal to the global creative class in general. A unique feature of the New Economy is its privileging and lavish rewarding given to those who exercise their creativity, and it promises to provide enough incentives and training to allow all individuals to turn their innate creative ability not only into means of self-realization but also forms of cultural capital. But in exchange the creative agent is asked to shoulder all risks by themselves, and they are put into an extremely competitive business environment where they are the only ones responsible for their continual "employability." It is urgent for us to discern the complex social embedding of creative labor, in order to avoid fetishizing creative labor as a "higher" form of labor, therefore legitimizing its vulnerability under the neo-liberal conditions. We must understand that it actually embodies the site where contradictions of late capitalism operate. Labor does not evaporate in the creative economy, but it is only more intricately shaped to accommodate to and justify a condensed and twisted economic logic.

## Trans-national Hong Kong Cinema

Widely recognized as East Asia's own dream factory, Hong Kong cinema has witnessed a

drastic deterioration in the last decade, with a sharp plummet in both the number of annual productions and box office receipts. Attempts to explain and improve the situation have been profuse,<sup>\*3</sup> but no clear signs of recovery are seen. In 2006 there were only 52 local featured films screened publicly in Hong Kong, a record low since World War II. In 1992, the domestic box office of Hong Kong films reached USD158m,<sup>\*4</sup> while in 2006 the annual receipts of local films in Hong Kong dropped to USD36m,<sup>\*5</sup> not taking into account the rate of inflation over the fourteen-year period. Confronting the rapid downsizing of the local film market, there have been many attempts among Hong Kong filmmakers to break into new markets, and increasingly we have seen a tendency where Hong Kong films are targeting the audiences of other regions. Films like *Gen-X Cops* (dir. Benny Chan, 1999), a Japanese co-production that features characters able to speak fluent Japanese and English, had a brief run in the North American markets, while many other recent Hong Kong films featuring Japanese and Korean stars are also meant for the larger East Asian population.<sup>\*6</sup> In the last few years, the presence of other Asian markets is increasingly felt in Hong Kong's films, as shown in the case of *A Battle of Wits* 墨攻 (dir. Jacob Cheung, 2006), a traditional Chinese story based on a Japanese manga starring Hong Kong, Mainland, and Korean stars. Interactions between Hong Kong cinema and Thai cinema have also intensified, as shown in the films of the Pang Brothers and Peter Chan, who both have strong personal Thai ties.<sup>\*7</sup> Established filmmakers and producers are particularly capable of seeking funding from a variety of sources. For example, Peter Chan has an elaborate financial network in Thailand, South Korea, and Japan to support the works produced by his studio, Applause Pictures. The projects of Stanley Kwan are sufficiently funded by investors from Japan and China, while Jacob Cheung was able to secure financial support from Japan, Korea, and China for the aforementioned *A Battle of Wits*. Internationally renowned directors like John Woo, Wong Kar-wai, and Andrew Lau all have their own transnational funding channels.

Of these fervent attempts to break into new markets, attentions are increasing convergent on mainland China, particularly after the box office successes of several Hong Kong–Mainland co-produced *dapian* (major film, 大片), like *Heroes* 英雄 (dir. Zhang Yimou, 2002), *House of Flying Daggers* 十面埋伏 (dir. Zhang Yimou, 2004), and *The Promise* 無極 (dir. Chen Kaige, 2005). As shown in Table 1, Hong Kong–Mainland Co-produced films have gradually become the dominant mode of production in Hong Kong cinema.

**Table 1: Hong Kong–Mainland Co-productions, 1996–2006**

Year	Number of all Hong Kong Films	Number of HK–Mainland co-production	Percentage of co-production
1996	108	19	17.59
1997	86	10	11.63
1998	85	8	9.41
1999	163	12	7.36
2000	144	7	4.86
2001	119	6	5.04
2002	91	12	13.19
2003	77	35	45.45
2004	63	43	68.25
2005	57	32	56.14
2006	51	29	56.86

Source: Zhao Fangwei, *Xianggang dianying canye liubian* (A Historical Account of Hong Kong's Film Industry) (Beijing: Zhongguo Dianying chubanshe, 2008), 154.

Not only Hong Kong's but filmmakers and investors around the world are showing keen interests in participating in China's development film scene. As shown in the recent investments of the Japanese media conglomerate AVEX on Chinese cinema, there is a clear projection, grounded or not, that China will quickly grow into a major film consumption market. As Nansun Shi, the Executive Director of Film Workshop Co. Ltd., brags in front of a group of potential international film investors: "In the U.S., with a population of roughly 300 million, they have 36,000 screens, whereas in China, with a population of about four times in size, they have a mere 2,700 screens. The room for growth and expansion is unimaginable."<sup>8</sup> While such statistics are meaningless outside of the context of the real cultural-economic situations in contemporary China, in the last few years we actually have seen a Chinese commercial film market, although far from mature, gradually materializing, and its rapid growth is particularly prominent when compared to the shrinking Hong Kong market.

Financing for Chinese film productions on all scales has gone beyond the borders of any single Chinese territory for decades, but the tendency clearly accentuates in recent years. From low budget art films to blockbusters, the credits of many Chinese films show sources of funding from around the world. Yet, it is also true that the primary trans-border flows of film finance are amongst Chinese territories and film producers. Pan Chinese co-productions have been thriving partly because they are welcomed by all the three film industries and markets. The mainland market dominates the current imaginations of Hong Kong's filmmakers, which is made even more concrete by policies like Mainland and Hong Kong Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA).

CEPA is an elaborate set of treaties governing many inter-regional businesses sectors between China and Hong Kong, including the movie industry.<sup>9</sup> It allows Hong Kong financiers to invest in those co-productions outside the regular foreign import quotas, and it also facilitates Hong Kong investors to establish movie theatre chains in the mainland, so that Hong Kong film companies can directly enjoy the vast mainland film market without any trade barrier. CEPA has its own specific political agenda, with the strong intention of fostering intimate commercial links between China and Hong Kong, thereby reinforcing the financial co-dependence of the two "places" after the city's reunification. There are also urges among Taiwanese filmmakers to their government to set up similar arrangement, so that Taiwanese investors can also benefit from the blooming Chinese film market. With obvious political reasons, such urges are still in vain. Although it is largely a set of commercial treaties, the CEPA is as commercial as political, and the favorable status granted to Hong Kong and not Taiwan demonstrates a certain dynamics among the three places, as well as the concerned film-making practices.

There is an interesting financial dynamics setting up among the three places not only in the area of film-making but in many other sectors, that currently China's markets are expanding without ends, while Hong Kong and Taiwan are overflowed with capitals hoping to find profitable outlets. Many Hong Kong and Taiwan investors are still interested in film-making, but they need to be guaranteed with return, which the mainland market seems to provide. At the same time, the patterns of such financial flows are undergoing changes as the PRC economy booms. Once finance flowed from Taiwan and Hong Kong into the mainland, which has now become also a source of finance for productions outside its borders. This specific finance-scape, coupled with and complicated by unique political tensions, encourages the merging of the three places in film-making, facilitating the development of a semi-coherent regional cinema with vigorous capital,

personnel, and technology flows.

### **New Film Directors**

Although many of these trans-border co-production films continue to embrace Hong Kong investors and major creative figures, the once-prosperous film industry of Hong Kong is under the threat of extinction because most of the actual productions now take place in mainland China, for the cheaper production costs and cultural proximity with the target audiences. Currently, there are only two or three projects undertaking in Hong Kong in any given day, and this production volume is far from ample to provide jobs to the many professional film workers.\*<sup>10</sup> While Hong Kong's film industry continues to operate, unemployment and under-employment is now norm.

I am particularly interested in the condition of new directors, as they are both the chief creative agents and members of the local workforce not able to escalate trans-nationally. New directors are seen and aspire to be forerunners bringing new energies and excitement to the Hong Kong industry, and they should also be the ones who could discern the changing global and local sensations, to which the earlier generation of filmmakers are increasingly insensitive. At a time when the Chinese film market is so rapidly transforming to an unknown destiny, fostering new creative talents is among the most urgent jobs of the industry. There is also a new infrastructure set up in the last few years to facilitate new filmmakers to helm their first works.

First, the Hong Kong government has stepped in to provide favorable policy for the cultivation of new filmmakers, under the economic promises of the seemingly fragrant creative industries discourse. The Films and Media Arts Committee of Hong Kong Arts Development Council (HKADC) has been the major financial source supporting the production of Hong Kong's independent video productions since 1997, realizing film-festival award winners like *GeGe* (dir. Mak Yuen Yan, 2001) and *Leaving Sorrowfully* (dir. Vincent Tsui, 2001). If HKADC is the major funding body for Hong Kong's indie films, Ying E Chi, which is a small non-profit organization usually run by only one full-time member, is the most important distribution platform. It was established in 1997 by a group of independent filmmakers in Hong Kong, with a mission to promote Hong Kong independent films locally and around the world. The primary job of Ying E Chi is distribution, arranging local screenings and disc sales of Hong Kong indie films. Another task of Ying E Chi is the personal service provided for individual filmmakers, helping them to identify distribution and film festival possibilities. It also assists filmmakers to locate related film organizations, production companies, talents, agencies, and other film-making personnel for their productions. Hong Kong Arts Centre, on the other hand, has organized the very successful Independent Film and Video Awards (IFVA) for 13 years already, which is now one of the most important launching platforms for Chinese independent works. It received a total of 57 submissions in 1995 in its inaugural event, but the number rose to 698 a decade after, with an increasing portion coming from the mainland and Taiwan.\*<sup>11</sup> With the introduction of digital technology, video production has become far less expensive and far more accessible, and this has now become one of the most popular means of self-expression among global youths. Also, thanks to the rapid expansion of university education in Hong Kong, we have seen a larger number of opportunities provided by universities for formal film/video production trainings.\*<sup>12</sup>

Many of these independent filmmakers are later absorbed by the film industry, and major commercial film companies like Mei Ah, EDKO, Sundream, and Filmko continue to invest in films directed by new directors. A few smaller companies, like Andy Lau's Focus and Eric

Tsang's Black and White films, are openly committed in discovering and providing chances for new talents. The fragrant mainland economy has also bred many new capitalists who happen to develop spontaneous interests in film-making, for legitimate or illegitimate reasons, and established or new filmmakers are often approached for spontaneous projects of such sort. Film festivals around the world continue to encourage all kinds of trans-national productions. By providing occasions for investors to locate potential projects, young producers and directors can tap into the trans-national film-making community through platforms like Hong Kong International Film Festival's Hong Kong-Asian Film Financing Forum (HAF) and Pusan International Film Festival's Pusan Promotion Plan (PPP).

Generally speaking, there seems to be a larger demand on smaller-budget films, providing profuse opportunities for new directors to helm their first projects; but the fetishization of "newness," a prominent feature of late-capitalist economy, also characterizes this cinema, making newcomers quickly unattractive. This seemingly prosperous picture for new filmmakers is also accompanied by their insecure freelance job environment.<sup>\*13</sup> With the exception of a few, directors no longer are provided with longer-term contracts and therefore have to negotiate with financiers for each of their new projects. Caught in a moment with such rich potential, new directors are generally not considered by investors for high budget trans-border blockbusters, but their films are often the most locally engaged because of their smaller budgets and the presumed smaller audience base. They are the first generation of Hong Kong directors—at least in terms of commercial cinema—who have to sail through the post-Fordist environment where the notion job security is extinct. Some critics call these younger filmmakers who start directing in the new millennium as the "New Generation Directors" (新生代導演).<sup>\*14</sup> There is an increasing discursive effort to name them as a collective phenomenon, by critics, the industry, as well as the government, to promote the works of these new directors as forces the works of these new directors as forces to revitalize the ailing Hong Kong cinema.<sup>\*15</sup> It is clear that chances are still given to new directors in Hong Kong, both in the industry and by critics, and they have made some impressive works characterizing a unique trend.

These directors, who loosely compose a new-director community, include Cheang Pou-soi 鄭寶瑞, Lee Kung Lok 李公樂, Wong Ching Po 黃精甫, Pang Ho-cheung 彭浩翔, Derek Chi-kin Kwok 郭子健, and Adam Sau-ping Wong 黃修平 Barbara Wong 黃珍珍, Patrick Pak-leung Kong 葉念琛, Patrick Nai-Hoi Yau 游乃海, Mak Yan-yan 麥婉欣, Law Chi-leung 羅志良, Carol Miu-suet Lai 黎妙雪, Susie Au 歐雪兒, William Wai Lun Kwok 郭偉倫, Simon Chung 鍾德勝, Law Wing Cheong 羅永昌, Kenneth Bi 畢國智, and Heiward Mak 麥曦茵. It is very difficult to classify them in a single stroke. These directors come from very different backgrounds. A few received formal film trainings from abroad, like Kenneth Bi, Simon Chung, and Barbara Wong, while some are local university graduates—Mak Yan Yan and Heiward Mak received formal film training at the Hong Kong Academy of Performing Arts and the City University of Hong Kong respectively, Patrick Kong has a degree in History, and Carol Lai studied Marketing. But many more began their film-making careers from junior positions in television stations or film studios: both Lee Kung Lok and Wong Ching Po were production assistants at TVB and China Star, while Pang Ho-Cheung worked in both television and radio stations before directing his first films. Many are long term apprentices of established filmmakers: before given the chance to direct, Cheang Pou-soi worked as Joe Ma's assistant director, while Law Chi-leung was Derek Yee's assistant for many years; Derek Kwok Chi-kin and Patrick Yau wrote film scripts for Wilson Yip and Johnnie To



respectively. These filmmakers, although differ from each other so much in background and interests, share the same existential identity: the “last” batch of creative laborers plunging into a vanishing industry.

These new filmmakers are considered as precious new blood desperately demanded by the failing Hong Kong industry, and they are still trusted with projects by investors in spite of the extremely high risks involved. However, with the very low director’s fee and insecure job conditions, many of them have to work as freelance for various media works in order to secure their basic living, while spending most of their time and energies working for “future” projects which never seem to be realized. Many of them have directed one or two films only, but they have chosen film-making as their life-time career, and they struggle to hold onto it as much as they could. These new directors are usually not attached with any studios, so that they have to secure at the same time their income and career prospects, which do not tend to overlap. Working for music videos, advertisements, corporate videos, education television, and other media projects, they also need to liaise themselves with investors and other filmmakers, constantly writing up new projects and participating in discussions, although most of the times these projects are never brought to fruition. The new market conditions and risks immanent in the trans-national co-production scene, including the volatile China censorship, multiple financial sources, constantly changing film policies, and incomprehensible film festival politics, are all matters new directors have to deal with which were not relevant to the older generation.

Hong Kong’s film industry continues to cultivate and absorb new talents, and the career paths of successful commercial filmmakers like Wong Kar-wai and Johnnie To are models for maturing filmmakers to follow. But Hong Kong’s film industry has been plunging deeper and deeper in a decade-long recession, catching these new directors in an ambivalent position. On the one hand, investors and producers are crying out for new ideas and new talents to come to terms with an incomprehensible but looming China market, and the equally incomprehensible young local audiences, so new directors continue to be trusted with new projects. On the other hand, there is no longer a steady stream of films produced by this film industry, and chances given to new directors are also scanty. Caught in an industry which is at the edge of disappearance, almost all commercial filmmakers are struggling with anguishes as complex as the meanings of their professional identity and as simple as making both ends meet. Once an industry famous for its productivity and chances given to new talents, from which Hollywood hunts for experienced filmmakers and performers, Hong Kong cinema now becomes almost like a haunting house driving workers away.

As it is well known, a special feature of the current digital age is the wide spread image-making activities among global youths, who can now more easily produce (through simple DV camera and editing software) and distribute (through online sites like Youtube) their works. But for those working in the industry, they have made a decision to turn hobby into a career. As a Hong Kong director agonized, young video makers tend to face the same dilemma upon hitting the age of thirty: One either opts out, or tries to move “up” to the commercial film world. Filmmakers in Hong Kong are caught in both its unique local and global socio-political circumstances, in which film-making is rendered both easier and more difficult. These new directors are not just idealists whose disillusionments are taken for granted, but they have already been trusted with real projects and they have decided to risk their future in this sunset industry. Their career is existentially intertwined with the industry, as critics and audiences confide in these new directors with the future of Hong Kong cinema, while the filmmakers themselves count their blessings from

the industry's continual prosperity.

Facing a volatile global film culture with no job security, the film-making career is a gung ho combat zone; many talented filmmakers started with great enthusiasms and quit film-making with a broken heart. Young directors, in spite of the aura associated with the glamorous film-making business, are exemplary creative laborers, who are exploited by the post-Fordist environment with an increasingly volatile environment providing no career safety net. The trans-border cinema might have offered more opportunities to aspirants to engage in film-making, but such flexibility might also further deprive them a stable creative and living environment to engage film-making more meaningfully. Many critics celebrate the democratization of creativity made available by new technologies and creative industries, but this same creative economy is also cultivated in a post-Fordist environment forestalling a stable career for most creative workers.\*<sup>16</sup>

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## Endnotes

- \* 1 John Hess and Patricia R. Zimmerman, "Transnational Documentaries: A Manifesto," *Afterimage*, 1997: 10 - 17; reprinted in Elizabeth Exra and Terry Rowden (eds), *Transnational Cinema: The Film Reader* (London: Routledge, 2006), 97 - 108.
- \* 2 Mette Hjort, *Small Nation, Global Cinema* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2005), 34 - 65.
- \* 3 In 1999, the Hong Kong government assigned around HK\$100 million to set up a Film Development Fund to support local productions, but the utilization of the fund has been extremely low, due to its heavy restrictions. Upon strong lobbying by the industry, the Hong Kong SAR Chief Executive Donald Tsang in his '2006 - 07 Policy Address' promised to step up government support to set up a Hong Kong Film Development Council to promote the film industry. <http://www.policyaddress.gov.hk/06-07/eng/p30.html>; accessed 20 Feb, 2007.
- \* 4 Qingwei 陳清偉, *Xianggang dianying gongye jiegou ji shichang fenxi* 香港電影工業結構及市場分析 (The structure and marketing analysis of Hong Kong film industry) (Hong Kong: Dianying shuangzhoukan, 2000), 7.
- \* 5 For Hong Kong's 2006 box office, see <http://www.hkfilmart.com/newsread.asp?newsid=1986>, accessed 9 Feb, 2007.
- \* 6 See Kwai-cheung Lo, "There is no Such Thing as Asia: Racial Particularities in the 'Asian' Films of Hong Kong and Japan," *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 17, no.1 (2005): 133 - 158.
- \* 7 For a recent study of Thai components in Hong Kong cinema, see Adam Knee, "Thailand in the Hong Kong Cinematic Imagination" in Gina Marchetti and Tan See Kam (ed), *Hong Kong Film, Hollywood and the New Global Cinema: No Film is an Island* (London: Routledge, 2007), 77 - 90.
- \* 8 Nansun Shi, "Hong Kong as an Asian Co-production Centre," speech delivered in the seminar "Hong Kong as an Asian Co-production Centre," American Film Market, Los Angeles. November 3, 2006. Private report provided by HKTDC.
- \* 9 For an updated summary of the CEPA treaties on the film industry, see <http://www.tdctrade.com/main/si/spfilm.htm>; accessed November 12, 2008.
- \* 10 According to data provided by Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department, there are 20,436 people employed in motion pictures and other entertainment services as of June 2008, although not all of them are directly related to the production of Hong Kong films, <http://bso.hktcdc.com/bso/monthly/EMPSErv.pdf>; accessed Jan 22, 2009.
- \* 11 Information received from Mickey Choi, IFVA. Email correspondence. August 4, 2008.
- \* 12 There are currently three undergraduate film production degree programs offered in Hong Kong by Department of Cinema



and Television at Hong Kong Baptist University, School of Film and Television at The Hong Kong Academy of Performing Arts, as well as School of Creative Media at The City University of Hong Kong.

- \* 13 I have conducted in-depth interviews with eight new Hong Kong directors from June 2007 to November 2008 to understand their working conditions and creative environment. But because many of the details are personal, I will keep them anonymous.
- \* 14 Lovefaye2002, "Tantan Xianggang de xinshengdai daoyan" 談談香港的新世代導演 (A report on Hong Kong's new generation directors), Sept 3, 2008. <http://bbs.ent.163.com/bbs/hkmovie/95283173.html>; accessed Sept 18, 2008.
- \* 15 See Lang Tian 朗天 (ed) 2003 *Xianggang dianyin huigu* 香港電影回顧 (2003 Hong Kong cinema retrospect) (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Critics Society, 2004), 235 – 243, 249 -251, 253. Thanks Chan Ka-ming for the reference.
- \* 16 For a more elaborate discussion of the working conditions of the creative worker, see Laikwan Pang, "The Labor Factor in the Creative Economy: A Marxist Reading," *Social Text* 99 (May 2009), forthcoming.
- \* 17 See also Hong Kong Film Development Council, "Outlines of 'Hong Kong Film?New Action,'" December 3, 2008, [http://www.fdc.gov.hk/NewAction/en/press/20081203\\_press2.htm](http://www.fdc.gov.hk/NewAction/en/press/20081203_press2.htm) (accessed Jan 29, 2009).